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Collaborative Action Research for English Language Teachers

Anne Burns



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For Ross, Douglas and Catherine

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1 Why should teachers do action research?

Collaborative action research is a powerful form of staff development because it is practice to theory rather than theory to practice. Teachers are encouraged to reach their own solutions and conclusions and this is far more attractive and has more impact than being presented with ideals which cannot be attained.

(Linda Ross, New South Wales)

1.1 Action research: a case study

Linda Ross is an experienced ESL teacher who has worked for several years in the Australian Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP). In 1995, because of changes in government funding arrangements, she found herself teaching a class of adult students with very diverse needs, who were quite unlike the kinds of immigrant groups she had previously encountered. Her class consisted of both first and second language English speakers and it focused on the development of literacy and numeracy skills. Linda describes her class (this and the following quotations are from Ross 1997: 133–7):

a boisterous, enthusiastic group of ten students in a class funded by the Department of Employment, Education and Training. [The class met] for 20 hours a week, four hours a day for 15 weeks and was for people who are long-term unemployed to assist their entry or re-entry into the workplace. The students' ages ranged from 17 to 42 and many had a somewhat chequered educational history.

Linda became part of a collaborative research group of teachers from different teaching centres within the same organisation who found action research a transformative means of responding to the changing profiles of their classes and developing new teaching strategies and approaches to meet their students' heterogeneous needs:

At the time I had very little knowledge of how action research works but the focus intrigued me. Surely we have all struggled with groups that are disparate to varying degrees. Could there be any answers? ...

1 *Why should teachers do action research?*

On the whole I felt adequate in the area of literacy. However, I felt inadequate in the area of numeracy. It was a new field for me and I was aware that the students' abilities varied widely ... In the numeracy sessions I handed out worksheets or selected areas from the textbook and then gave assistance as required. These sessions felt hectic, chaotic and generally unsatisfactory.

At the beginning of the project, Linda felt uncertain as to how to find a specific focus for her research, so she began by simply observing her lessons:

noting what [I] saw and so start focusing on the issues ... I began jotting rough notes immediately after lessons. On 22/3/95 I noted: 'In a half hour session the stronger students only got a few minutes attention ... and how can I be sure that the weaker ones are in fact gaining the skills and concepts that they lack?'

On 27/3/95 I wrote: 'A typical numeracy lesson – hectic! We revised fractions. The stronger ones know immediately that $\frac{1}{4}$ is half of $\frac{1}{2}$. The weaker ones look completely mystified. I need to go much further back for the weak students. How will I find time?'

A few days later I added: 'A support teacher would help – and more graded materials – and more expertise!'

Through these notes and other observations it began to become clearer to Linda why she felt so dissatisfied with these sessions:

- Despite expending considerable energy, my efforts were piecemeal.
- I needed a far clearer picture of the strengths, weaknesses and progress of each student.
- I needed to develop the basic skills of the weak students but at the same time extend the strong students.
- My classroom activities were both a time management and a course design issue.

Having analysed some of the problematic factors in her classroom, Linda developed a number of practical action strategies to address them. She proceeded through a series of research phases, each of which enabled her to discover more about her students and how to meet their needs. First, she set about gaining a clearer picture of the students' strengths, weaknesses and skills and developing ways of tracking their progress:

I developed a checklist of skills so that I could monitor the progress of each student ... I include a small section below:

1.1 Action research: a case study

	Lillian	Warren	Chris	Kerin	Mike	George	John	Barry	Peter	Kelly
Uses place value up to 5 places										
Uses decimal point appropriately										
Can read numbers from calculator										
Can 'round up'										

The checklist proved extremely useful and the numeracy session felt far more focused. The checklist became the basis of my lesson planning.

Linda was still worried about the amount of time she was able to give to each student. She decided to find out how the students felt:

I began to discuss some of my concerns with the students ... I mentioned to some of the stronger students that I felt I was neglecting them. They were surprised and assured me that they liked the present system. One of them told me in her usual direct manner:

We don't want a teacher breathing down our necks. We don't like to be treated like kids. We like it when you give us the sheet and we can just get on with it. Don't worry – we'll yell if we need you.

I felt an incredible sense of relief! Why hadn't I spoken to them earlier.

Aiming to improve the classroom management problems she had identified, Linda decided to divide the class into ability groups:

I prepared worksheets at two levels and gave them out – as discreetly as possible – according to the ability of the student. The students did not actually move into groups. The aim was to allow the weaker students to develop skills at a much slower pace, while extending and challenging the stronger students.

... I abandoned this approach very shortly after introducing it as it

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was more destructive than constructive. Despite my efforts, the students immediately compared their sheets and there was a subtle change in the group dynamics. Two of the weaker students began to come late, did not bring pens, had not done their homework and so on.

I had made the mistake of 'labelling' some students as under-achievers and realised that I had undermined their morale. This was interesting since they had always found it quite acceptable to label themselves . . . It seemed it was quite different if the teacher did the labelling.

Linda reflected on the outcomes of these strategies and decided on a new course of action:

I realised that in my enthusiasm for greater efficiency, I had undermined the self-esteem of the students who required the greatest support. I decided on a new strategy . . . I took graded materials into the classroom and explained that the first worksheet was to be done by everyone and was compulsory. After that it was up to the students how much they completed.

I found this method successful. Even though I had feared that the stronger students would complete the compulsory sheet in a few minutes and then simply chat, this was not the case and they were keen to go on with the extra work. The weaker students seemed to gain satisfaction from the fact that they were able to complete the compulsory work successfully.

Using the checklist as the basis of my ongoing assessment, I felt that I was now far better able to monitor progress. At the end of the course it was apparent that all the students had made good progress.

A further step in the research, and additional insights into her students' needs, came when Linda enlisted the cooperation of one of the two researcher coordinators with whom her action research group worked.

This last step should have come much earlier in the process as it gave me so much insight into the students' perceptions and needs. One of the research coordinators, Sue Hood, visited the class and asked the students questions concerning their preferred learning styles and past learning experiences. The students responded very positively to the fact that their views were being sought and valued.

Sue: Is it a problem in the class . . . that you have different things you want to do? (General agreement from students that this is not a problem.)

Chris: The one thing is we're all learning. That's the main factor.

- Sue: Do you prefer to do all the same work . . . so that you're doing the same activity? (General agreement from students that they prefer this.)
- Stephen: I reckon it makes it easier for everyone to learn that way and that's the best way to learn instead of teaching say three one thing and three another and somebody else different . . .

Linda drew a number of conclusions from the research she had conducted:

As a result of this project I realised that I needed to reconsider a number of issues which had concerned me . . . When faced with disparate levels in a class, it would seem practical to divide the class into groups according to their ability. However, in a class where the development of self-esteem is crucial to learning, this arrangement may serve to undermine the confidence of the weakest members. The students in this particular class clearly favoured a system where they participated as equal members of the group, supporting one another as necessary.

I had viewed the class as a teacher and educationalist and I had focused on the negative aspects of being in a group of disparate learners. I had been worried that I was not giving the students equal attention and that I would not be able to assist all of them to achieve the course competencies. I discovered that the students did not expect to get equal attention, but that they only wanted help when they had a problem, and while they were keen to progress, they gave equal importance to factors such as belonging to the group. In fact, the students were very positive about the class. They did not see themselves as a 'disparate group' but as a cooperative group who supported one another in achieving their goals.

Linda had this to say about collaborative action research:

I would strongly recommend action research to all teachers. The process is rewarding because it validates classroom observation and encourages you to value your own judgements. The sessions with other teachers help to shape your ideas and challenge you to rethink many issues. In my case it reminded me of the value of asking the opinions of the students. Finally, while traditional forms of professional development can be very stimulating it is sometimes difficult to relate the theory with which teachers are presented to the reality of the classroom. Action research is refreshing as it is concerned with the classroom as it really is.

Linda Ross's report (see Ross 1997 for a full account) provides an example of how a teacher who was part of a collaborative action research group developed a critical perspective on her practice and observed systematically various influential factors operating in her

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classroom by using action research as a powerful medium of reflection. This is not to suggest that teachers such as Linda are deficient in what they already do; it is rather to propose that reflective analysis of one's own teaching develops a greater understanding of the dynamics of classroom practice and leads to curriculum change that enhances learning outcomes for students.

Doing action research collaboratively is the focus of this book. It is based on my experiences over a number of years of working with several groups of second language teachers in the AMEP, as well as with teachers in schools and organisations elsewhere in Australia. These teachers have been interested in working collaboratively to put into practice the principles of action research in order to investigate and reflect critically on their own teaching situations. Overwhelmingly, the teachers with whom I have worked as an action research collaborator have indicated that they greatly value doing action research. Based on my experiences, I therefore take the position that researching one's own classrooms and teaching contexts is something which can, and should, be considered by language teachers, as a realistic extension of professional practice. The book aims to provide both a theoretical and a practical guide for teachers who wish to extend their role in this way in order to include a research focus. In presenting such a guide, I acknowledge that teachers may not always have the opportunity to work in a collaborative relationship with teacher educators/researchers and with other teachers. However, I also make the assumption that second and foreign language teachers have an increasing number of reasons for wanting to conduct action research – their own professional development, a desire to develop research skills, a wish to present systematic evidence for change to their schools or teaching organisations, or completion of a university course with an action research component.

1.2 A collaborative perspective on action research

Action research, as it is now more typically portrayed in the second language literature (e.g. Nunan 1989, 1992), has tended to take on an individualistic focus, of teachers investigating teaching and learning in the isolation of their own classrooms (Richards and Freeman 1992). However, that view of action research is counter to its original goals, which were to bring about change in social situations as the result of group problem-solving and collaboration. This perspective implies that the main purpose of individual classroom investigation is to reinforce the broader goals of the group, as Kemmis and McTaggart (1988: 5) suggest:

1.2 *A collaborative perspective on action research*

The approach is only action research when it is *collaborative*, though it is important to realise that the action research of the group is achieved through the *critically examined action* of individual group members [emphasis in original].

While not denying the relevance, and even the necessity, of individual classroom research in certain contexts, this book aims to expand current portrayals of action research in language teaching. Collaborative action research processes strengthen the opportunities for the results of research on practice to be fed back into educational systems in a more substantial and critical way. They have the advantage of encouraging teachers to share common problems and to work cooperatively as a research community to examine their existing assumptions, values and beliefs within the sociopolitical cultures of the institutions in which they work. Policies and practices within the organisation are more likely to be opened up to change when such changes are brought about through group processes and collective pressures. Collaborative action is potentially more empowering than action research conducted individually as it offers a strong framework for whole-school change.

In presenting a collaborative perspective as the motivation for this book, I draw on action research studies which have been undertaken by teachers working within groups rather than by individuals. These case studies and examples are used to provide practical guidance to other practitioners interested in knowing more about collaborative processes of action research. They also aim to strengthen the position of practising teachers' own voices in the second language literature on action research, voices which provide realistic accounts for other teachers of what it is like to conduct action research, and which can hopefully provide other teacher groups with suggestions about what is feasible and valuable within the constraints of other classroom pressures.

There is a further point to be raised briefly in relation to the collaborative aspect in action research which is only rarely touched upon in the 'teacher as researcher' literature. In a recent discussion, Golombek (1994: 404) criticises traditional research on teachers' knowledge about teaching as paternalistic, suggesting that 'the knowledge that is close to science of a theoretician is more highly valued than that of a practitioner'. She cites feminist research which indicates that women's ways of constructing knowledge are more context-dependent and personally orientated (Belenky *et al.* 1986), and suggests that this is likely to have particularly negative implications for women within the more dominant research approaches. Similarly, Freeman (1991, cited in Golombek 1994) has pointed out that women's ways of knowing have been discredited in the positivist paradigm. In a teaching profession which is largely populated by women, the inherently supportive and contextualised nature of collaborative action research may well provide

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an important avenue for language teachers' (and particularly female language teachers') voices to be strengthened. In addition, the increase in individual and collective knowledge about teaching, as it occurs through teachers' own experiences, has the potential to bring research and practice closer together in productive ways.

1.3 Teachers' responses to action research

In language teaching, as well as in the broader educational community, a strong distinction has often been made between academic research and classroom practice. Academic research conventions have created a separation between theory, research and practice (Hopkins 1993), with the result that many teachers regard research, at best with suspicion and at worst with contempt, as the province of academic researchers who know little – and understand less – about the day-to-day business of life in the language classroom (Beasley and Riordan 1981; McDonough and McDonough 1990). Even when teachers are interested in research and research findings, they may believe that they do not have the skills, training or knowledge to carry out research according to empirical requirements.

In recent years, it has become increasingly commonplace in the field of English as a second or foreign language to hear or read about the 'reflective practitioner' and the 'teacher as researcher'. But why should English language teachers become researchers? After all, teachers already lead busy classroom lives. Why should they wish to add research to all their other classroom responsibilities?

Teachers with whom I have worked have pointed to what they see as the benefits of involvement in action research. A group of twenty ESL teachers, who participated in a recent Australian collaborative project exploring the impact of the introduction of a new competency-based curriculum on teachers' course design, suggested a number of reasons why they viewed action research in a positive light (A. Burns 1997: 107–8). First, teachers highlighted the capacity of action research to enable them to engage more closely with their classroom practice as well as to explore the realities they faced in the process of curriculum change:

It made me evaluate what I was doing in my classes. I think I have become more methodical in the way I approach assessment and in my explanation to the class, not in *what* I do (which is much the same) but *how*.

It gave me an opportunity to *undertake* action research and to learn about this method as it related to my teaching.

1.3 Teachers' responses to action research

It gives teachers an opportunity to reflect on the decisions behind what they do. As well it helps provide a foundation for further developing the curriculum.

Second, collaboration with other teachers was seen as a significant benefit personally and as a key factor in generating solutions to changes in institutional demands:

It gave me an opportunity to meet with others outside the centre, to listen to their ideas and their methods of solving problems which seem to be common to all.

Collaboration: discussion was most worthwhile – broadening perspectives, feedback, reinforcement and support.

Other comments related to the sense of personal and professional growth teachers had experienced:

It felt good to be part of a project again. I liked having the time and direction to reflect on what I was doing and why.

It was fun! When you're feeling pretty jaded by college and state bureaucracy, it's nice to stretch the brain a bit.

Writing up – time for reflection, depth of perspective.

I felt a degree of personal satisfaction once I collected the data and completed the write up – a feeling that I had challenged myself and was able to meet the challenge to a certain extent.

Increased self-awareness and personal insight were also valued:

Self-analysis – examining strengths and weaknesses – reaffirming commitment to principles of teaching.

I was surprised by the responses from a questionnaire I gave the students and it was interesting for me to write this up.

Some teachers also suggested that they could now understand the reasons and need for institutional curriculum change more clearly:

It clarified important issues from outside the classroom.

It gave me a great feeling of being part of a progression, rather than just fulfilling the teaching requirements of a particular Stage.

More sensitive now to the demands made by industry on students and teachers. Able to accommodate those that are useful – discriminate those that aren't.

These comments suggest that collaborative action research has the capacity to initiate and enhance teachers' research skills as a natural extension of teaching practice. They also suggest that action research is what Linda Ross, the teacher whose comments are presented at the beginning of this chapter, described as 'a powerful form of staff

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development'. The teachers' responses indicate that, from their point of view, classroom enquiry and self-reflection are important components of professional growth, providing a sound source for pedagogical planning and action and enabling them to frame the local decisions of the classroom within broader educational, institutional and theoretical considerations. They saw collaborative critical enquiry as a source of teacher empowerment, as it develops the ability to evaluate curriculum policy decisions and to exercise professional judgement and it affirms the role of the teacher.

The views expressed by these teacher researchers are echoed by Goswami and Stillman's (1987: preface) persuasive account of what happens when teachers experience research as part of their teaching role:

- 1 Their teaching is transformed in important ways: they become theorists, articulating their intentions, testing their assumptions, and finding connections with practice.
- 2 Their perceptions of themselves as writers and teachers are transformed. They step up their use of resources; they form networks; and they become more active professionally.
- 3 They become rich resources who can provide the profession with information it simply doesn't have. They can observe closely, over long periods of time, with special insights and knowledge. Teachers know their classrooms and students in ways that outsiders can't.
- 4 They become critical, responsive readers and users of current research, less apt to accept uncritically others' theories, less vulnerable to fads, and more authoritative in their assessment of curricula, methods and materials.
- 5 They can study writing and learning and report their findings without spending large sums of money (although they must have support and recognition). Their studies while probably not definitive, taken together should help us develop and assess writing curricula in ways that are outside the scope of specialists and external evaluators.
- 6 They collaborate with their students to answer questions important to both, drawing on community resources in new and unexpected ways. The nature of classroom discourse changes when inquiry begins. Working with teachers to answer real questions provides students with intrinsic motivation for talking, reading, and writing and has the potential for helping them achieve mature language skills.

In a similar vein, Kemmis and McTaggart (1982: 2–5) list a number of benefits which can accrue from involvement in action research processes. They include:

- thinking systematically about what happens in the school or classroom

- implementing action where improvements are thought to be possible
- monitoring and evaluating the effects of the action with a view to continuing the improvement
- monitoring complex situations critically and practically
- implementing a flexible approach to school or classroom improvement through action and reflection
- researching the real, complex and often confusing circumstances and constraints of the modern school
- recognising and translating evolving ideas into action.

Over twenty years ago, Stenhouse (1975: 143), a major proponent of action research in the context of mainstream education, summarised some of the central arguments for teachers carrying out research. These are now gaining greater currency in the field of second language teaching:

The uniqueness of each classroom setting implies that any proposal – even at school level – needs to be tested and verified and adapted by each teacher in his [*sic*] own classroom. The ideal is that the curricular specifications should feed a teacher's personal research and development programmes through which he is increasing his own understanding of his own work and hence bettering his teaching . . . It is not enough that teachers' work should be studied; they need to study it themselves.

According to these accounts, then, action research offers a valuable opportunity for teachers to be involved in research which is felt to be relevant, as it is grounded in the social context of the classroom and the teaching institution, and focuses directly on issues and concerns which are significant in daily teaching practice.

1.4 Summary

In this chapter I have suggested that action research has a number of personal and professional benefits for second language teachers. These arguments are drawn from the perceptions of teachers who have undertaken action research as well as from the professional literature. In particular, the chapter has aimed to present a case for a move away from the current predominantly individualistic versions of action research to more collaborative and critical interpretations.

I have presented action research in a positive light, with the aims of presenting a rationale for teachers to engage in action research and building a case for critical reflection on practice as integral to teachers' personal and professional development. However, like Linda Ross, many teachers with whom I have worked have initially been uncertain

1 Why should teachers do action research?

about what action research involves and how to do it. The aim of this book is to draw on their experience and to present practical guidelines for teachers who want to work together to explore their classrooms through an action research approach. In the chapters that follow, the central themes of the book are taken up and extended in greater detail. Chapter 2 discusses the nature and origins of action research and outlines phases in the action research process, while Chapter 3 considers starting points for research, and particularly how a focus for research can be developed. It also reviews the ethical issues to be considered. Chapters 4 and 5 look at procedures and techniques for data collection, using practical illustrations from case studies of collaborative projects. Chapter 6 is concerned with analysing data and drawing out implications for practice. In Chapter 7, ways of reporting on action research and maintaining the impact of action research processes at the classroom and organisational levels are discussed. Chapter 8 aims to illustrate further the realities of conducting action research by presenting excerpts from case study accounts written by teachers and research coordinators who have participated in collaborative projects. Reports by teachers who have conducted collaborative action research are still relatively rare in the second language literature. Readers who are impatient to read accounts of action research in practice may wish to begin with this chapter before working through the more detailed discussion of processes contained in the previous chapters.

In my experience, a helpful first step is often made when teachers gain an overview of different approaches to educational research and the various research processes and methods related to these approaches; this allows for a better understanding of what action research is and what it is not. The next chapter, therefore, considers briefly different approaches to conducting research in the field of English as a second language education and discusses how action research fits into these perspectives. It goes on to discuss the origins of action research and to draw out the relevant phases and processes which can be expected to occur in an action research cycle.

Group discussion tasks

- 1 To what extent do you agree with the idea that teachers may find academic research findings unrelated to their daily classroom work? Consider reasons for your responses.
- 2 To what extent do you draw on research in your own teaching? Do you, for example, consult the professional literature? If so, what kind of articles or books do you read and how do you use them in your teaching?

Group discussion tasks

- 3 What reasons for carrying out collaborative action research can you suggest other than those listed in Section 1.3?
- 4 What difficulties or constraints might present themselves for teachers wishing to form a collaborative research group?
- 5 Based on the brief account outlined in this chapter, develop your own working definition of action research.
- 6 List what you understand at this point to be the main characteristics of action research.
- 7 What arguments are there for conducting collaborative action research rather than individual action research?
- 8 What would be the advantages of conducting individual action research?